

Statement of Chairman Henry Cuellar (D-TX), as prepared

Subcommittee on Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism Committee on Homeland Security

The Role of Unmanned Aerial Systems and Border Security

July 15, 2010

We meet here today at a critical juncture in our nation's border and homeland security. As 21st Century threats evolve, our country is facing new challenges that demand new solutions. At our Northern and Southern borders, we've taken critical steps to interdict the flow of illegal weapons, people, drugs and cash.

Since 2007, Congress has continued to increase border security funding, and as a result we've doubled the number of Border Patrol agents from 10,000 in 2004 to over 20,000 today.

Still, our nation's communities along our borders and coastal waters face a unique exposure to threats. And to mitigate those risks we have to deploy a combination of manpower, technology and resources to strengthen our strategy for securing our borders.

Unmanned Aerial Systems and the remotely-piloted aircraft known as the UAV or Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, is a relatively new means for providing real-time intelligence to combat illegal activity along our borders.

For the past five years, these aircraft have patrolled our Northern and Southern borders providing critical intelligence to our law enforcement officers. UAVs essentially put eyes in the sky to give us a real-time view of what's happening on the ground. In remote sections of our borders, these aircraft give us a window we don't otherwise have with ground patrol alone.

UAVs are a force-multiplier for our Federal, State and Local law enforcement as they provide the intelligence to help detect, disrupt, and dismantle unlawful activity along our borders.

UAVs also give law enforcement and prosecutors the necessary evidence to prosecute criminals engaged in narcotics, human, and bulk cash smuggling, as well as arms trafficking. Increasingly, UAVs will become a familiar means for providing our homeland security.

Thus, we join here today to discuss how the Department of Homeland Security uses UAVs within their portfolio to secure our nation. Many of us here today understand the challenges of expanding this program, and through this forum I'd like for us to inspire new ways to overcome those challenges.

Currently, there are five UAVs patrolling our borders, plus a most recent maritime variant that just completed a pilot-program off the coast of Florida this spring.

After months of work with Customs and Border Protection and the Federal Aviation Administration, the first-ever Certificate of Authorization (COA) allowing UAV flights in Texas was approved this June.

Effective September 1, this approval will allow UAV flights to patrol the Texas-Mexico border and the Texas Gulf Coast which shares waters with neighboring Mexico. Keep in mind that the Texas-Mexico border spans 1,200 miles of the 2,000 miles of the nation's southern border.

Thus, deploying UAVs to Texas is a critical step in securing the U.S.-Mexico border. As the U.S. Representative to the nation's largest inland trading port in Laredo, Texas, I can tell you that the communities I represent are at the frontlines of U.S.-Mexico policy everyday.

And as violence continues in neighboring Mexico, our communities feel the impact across the Rio Grande, the narrow river that connects our two nations. 2010 has reached a boiling point as turf wars and gunfire unfold just minutes from our neighborhoods.

American families don't travel to Mexico as frequently as they did, and now Mexicans fear traversing Mexican border towns to enter the United States.

Since January alone and just miles from my district, in neighboring Mexico we've seen two U.S. Consulates forced to close and reopen, two USDA livestock inspection sites in Mexico close then reopen in the U.S., multiple drug-related shootings, pirates intimidating American boaters on Falcon Lake, and other activities that have disrupted the lives of U.S. citizens.

These are the types of situational threats where putting eyes in the sky can assist our law enforcement in monitoring patterns and practices of criminal organizations along our borders.

And monitoring these situations will give us the opportunity to prevent a spillover of violence from Mexico into the United States. Moving forward, I want to hear how DHS will expand the role of UAVs as a means for border security in the future: lessons learned, plans looking ahead and what Congress needs to do in the meantime.

Most recently, the House passed \$701 million in emergency border security funds for the southern border. Included in this funding are funds for two additional UAV systems for DHS.

Now we await the Senate's approval on this vital funding for our federal, state and local law enforcement. But despite the funding we have other obstacles to overcome. Training pilots to fly these UAVs at home has proven difficult at a time when similar aircraft are being used in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Today, I look forward to discussing with General Kostelnik his views on how best we attract, train and retain UAV pilots to keep up with the pace of new UAV systems in the United States.

Specifically, we need to examine the challenges of training these pilots, the time it takes and what the necessary means are for fulfilling the future of this program. And then we look to the FAA who is the entity responsible for approving the flights of these aircraft systems.

I am particularly interested in the process of how the FAA approves the flights of these aircraft, the safety implications involved and the timetable for approval.

Specifically, we need to discuss how Border and National Security requests for the Certificate of Authorization (COA) fall in the queue of all other COA requests. As I understand, you have over 180 pending COA requests before the FAA and priority is given to homeland security-related submittals.

But what if there are multiple homeland security issues at one given time? Does the FAA have a contingency plan in place to approve UAVs to respond to multiple national emergencies?

Americans know threats don't wait for us to prepare. Now is the time for us to strengthen our strategy of combining technology and manpower to protect the homeland by way of domestic capabilities, in addition to our efforts abroad.

UAVs are one more tool for us to stay steps ahead and leaps above the threats we face. And they can help us deter and prevent illegal activity and threats of terrorism against the United States. In the event of a national crisis, they would provide critical eyes in the sky for what we can't see or do from the ground.

Thus, I look forward to our hearing today to examine and explore the Role of Unmanned Aerial Systems in providing Border Security.